1st

Nirmal Kumar Bose Memorial Lecture, 1993

The Heritage of Nirmal Kumar Bose
Indian Civilization: Structure and Change

by
Surajit Chandra Sinha



Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts
New Delhi

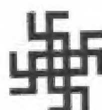


Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose

(January 22, 1901 - Octobr 15, 1972)

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The Heritage of Nirmal Kumar Bose

I consider it to be a very special honour to be invited by the authorities of Indira Gandhi National Centre For the Arts to deliver the first Nirmal Kumar Bose Memorial Lecture which has been organised by this Centre. I am very happy that Professor Andre Beteille, who had carefully translated into English Bose's *Hindu Samajer Gadan* (The Structure of Hindu Society), will preside over this session. It was suggested to me that the lectures may deal with some dimensions of Indian Civilization: Structure and Change, a subject which was very dear to our great mentor Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose.

In this first lecture I shall be considering how Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose presented his ideas about the structure and transformation of Indian civilization.

In the second lecture I will present my own thinking about the same problem, which has been substantially influenced by Bose.

Nirmal Bose was born at Gopimohan Dutta Lane, Bagbazar, Calcutta on January 22, 1901. When he grew up Nirmal developed great admiration for his father Bimanbehari, a doctor, for his scholarship, professional integrity and independent character. Bimanbehari rarely advised his young son about mending his exhuberant and turbulent ways. Young Nirmal was very good in sports. Bimanbehari used to tell his wife: "You will see, Nirmal will become a very famous person." At the age of ten or eleven

Nirmal used to tell his mother: "I will leave home and work for my country".

Bimanbehari died in 1917 when Nirmal was seventeen. He became vigorously involved in the study of 'Science' at Scottish Church College, Calcutta. But he also developed interest in social relief work. In 1919 Bose joined Presidency College as a graduate student with Honours in Geology. He passed with First Class Honours in 1921. But he soon left the Government College in response to Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. He settled down at Puri where his father had built a house. From his base at Puri, Bose kept close contact with the development of the movement. He also became interested in the architecture and sculptures of the temples of Puri, and later on, of Konark and Bhubaneswar. This led him to the publication of an important book, *Canons of Orissan Architecture* (1932).

Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee used to visit Puri regularly in those days. He met young Nirmal while he was lecturing to the Bengali visitors on different aspects of architecture of the Jagannath temple. Ashutosh was very much impressed by Nirmal's brilliant and precise expositions. He suggested to Nirmal that he should join Calcutta University (which was not a Government controlled institution) as an M.Sc. student in Anthropology. Ashutosh convinced Nirmal that his rigorous training in geology and rich experience in studying the canons of architecture of Orissa temples would help him to study anthropology at Calcutta University. Nirmal Bose decided to obey Sir Ashutosh's command and joined Calcutta University as a Post-Graduate student in Anthropology. He passed the M.Sc. examination in Anthropology in 1925 with a brilliant record.

In 1925 Bose went to study the Juang tribe who practised shifting cultivation and lived in the hills and forests of Pal Lahara feudatory state. After a few weeks

of study of the Juang, Bose observed that the tribals, who spoke a Mundari language of their own, were not served by Brahmana and Vaishnava priests. They performed their marriage and funeral ceremonies by themselves. They ate beef and were not considered 'Hindu' by the local Hindu castes. But Bose also found that there were clear indications that Hindu religious ideas had penetrated into their culture. In January, 1928, in a small village, where Bose was camping for some time, the Juang Headman of the village performed a ritual so that 'the outsider guest' could learn to speak their language. The prayers included terms like *satya* (truth) and *dharma devata* (God of righteousness). Offerings of sun-dried rice were also made to several deities, including the Hindu goddess Lakshmi. Two black cocks were sacrificed to gods and goddesses, and the blood sprinkled on the drums preserved in the village common house.

Bose was struck by the fact that although the Juangs were outside the fold of Hinduism, yet there was a clear indication that Hindu religious ideas had penetrated their culture. He also observed that under the pressure of Pala Lahara feudatory chiefs the Juangs had been made to adopt wet cultivation in the valleys between the hills and also to work in bamboo and sal leaf baskets, etc. for the neighbouring people. With the money earned thus, they bought cloth, iron, salt and rice. Thus, instead of being more or less economically self-contained they had been tagged on to the larger body of Hindu society; they formed only a cog in the wheel of the advanced productive machinery of the Hindus. This fact of economic affiliation to Hindu society may explain why the Juangs considered the culture of the Hindus superior to their own.

Bose observes: "From what has been observed among the Juangs and from a reading of the (traditional) law books, it is to be noted that Hindu society, when observing a new tribe or while creating a new Jati by differentiation

of occupation, always guaranteed, or tried to guarantee, monopoly in a particular occupation to each caste within a given region. They (the economic and social legislators of ancient India) tried to build up a social organization on the basis of hereditary monopolistic guilds that lay at the basis of the caste system."

Bose further comments: "It appears that the success of the monopolistic guilds organization led to two very important results in history. One was that poor tribal people came easily within the fold of the more successful productive organization of the Hindus; and the second was that the subjugated classes did not rise in revolt because Hindu society assured them a certain minimum of economic security which they could not attain under their own tribal production system, particularly after the latter had been affected by conquest of Hindu encroachments on the fertile portions of the land. The Hindus, moreover, exercised a policy of *laissez faire* with regard to social and religious practices of the tribal people even when they came within Hinduism, and this cultural autonomy may partly have been responsible for keeping the subjugated tribes satisfied." Bose further states: "Hindus hardly left any economic freedom to the Jatis, but they left intact the original social and religious culture of the tribes insofar as that was possible. Their policy was not to eradicate the old beliefs and practices where they were not inconsistent with Brahmanical moral ideas".

Bose observes that in spite of the above-mentioned catholicism in the Hindu tribal interaction since ancient times there are textual records of how the brahmanas very often put a stop to progress on the part of the subjugated people towards higher and higher standards of 'culture'. Bose observes: "In the *Ramayana*, we are told how Rama had to kill Sambuka, the sudra who aspired to spiritual upliftment through exercises preserved for the twice-born Varnas".

Bose became interested in comparing the brahmana approach to ethnic/caste autonomy with the ethnic policy pronouncements of the Soviet Union. He observed that "whereas the social scientists in the Soviet Union look upon the tribal religions and social cultures as so many unwanted survivals from the past, the Brahmin believed in the permanent necessity of many forms of culture fitted to different stages of mental development. Thus he was like a pantheist in social idealism. But whether this catholicity sprang from a genuine sense of human love, or whether the priestly class fashioned it and stuck to it in order to prevent 'low' castes from rising high in social scale, we cannot say accurately at this distance of time. Some idealists like Sankara or, in more recent times, like Ramakrishna Paramhansa, seemed to have desired the progress of all castes in mental development, while others surely wanted to keep them in their old place in order to preserve their aristocratic distinction".

The above quotations make it clear that although Bose laid great stress on the role of ideas, he also felt that a very important part is played by economic matters even in the scheme of social and cultural relations. He writes: "culture, as we have already indicated, flowed from a politically and economically dominant group to subservient ones". On the basis of the above observation he states: "We may venture to suggest for our national life that if we set the Juang, the Munda or the so-called untouchable castes shoulder to shoulder with ourselves in a democratically organized society, we should make sure of economic re-organization first if we want to build a new social order on a permanent basis".

Bose refers to Mahatma Gandhi's Harijan movement in the above context, which did succeed in focusing the attention of the public on the wrongs suffered by the suppressed castes under Hinduism. But Bose feels that "unless the movement is backed by a revolutionary change

in economic relations at the same time, it will not succeed in undoing social wrongs permanently".

In another important article "Caste in India", Bose observes: "Caste assured employment and security to all; but it also served as a steady source of economic and cultural advantages for the dominant group. It thus prevented the full and unhampered growth of personality of the lowlier people who came under its way".

Bose, however, emphasized a special feature of individual liberty in Hinduism: "The Hitopadesha says that the individual has to be sacrificed for the family, the family for the village, the village for the country, but the whole world itself has to be sacrificed for the sake of the soul. Definite arrangements were, therefore, made in India for releasing the individual from all forms of social obligation if he so desired, and actually stood in need of it. The price demanded of the individual was indeed heavy. He had to surrender all the benefits normally derived from collective life; he had to live upon the minimum of clothes, have no roof over his head, and to be constantly on the move. He was to become God's beggar. And in order to enter into the *Sannyasa* order, the individual had to perform the last rite of *shraddha* for his own soul. The *Sannyasi* was put beyond the normal operation of social laws. He was no longer obliged to maintain the sacred fire, which is the householder's first duty. Thus, although, Hindu society suppressed the individual under normal conditions, yet the restriction took a voluntary character as he could escape from its rigours through the backdoor of the institution of *Sannyasa*. We may imagine that this safety valve was, to some extent, for the stabilization of the Hindu order of the society".

Bose points out that although India's main rural based economic arrangement worked more or less smoothly for many centuries, it created a mentally unfavourable

situation in the event of war. When the army of elephants had to meet the challenge of the mobile cavalry of Central Asia, they proved unequal to the task, even when they did not lack in personal valour or were superior in sheer numbers.

The system of caste, however, endured without much vital change, particularly in the villages.

Bose writes that the promise of social equality in Islam "proved an attraction for many minds. Various religious sects came into being within the fold of Hinduism which tried to incorporate the idea of social equality or emphasize the idea of oneness of god that Islam preached".

Bose observes that towards the end of Moslem domination of India, some leaders of the Hindu society felt that the infiltration of Moslem influence would prove disastrous to the Hindu way of life and a large section of the Hindu society retired within its shell in urgent desire of self-defence. Such a state of self-defensive attitude led to a series of puritanic reforms when caste rules and observances were at least formally made more rigid. Bose observes: "The system lost its elasticity, and the absorption of tribes or the formation of new castes, which were approved by the king, become practically a thing of the past".

Nirmal Bose was by no means a spokesman for going back to the production system of the past in India. But he felt that two aspects of the ancient heritage have great relevance to the present. These are: "the democracy of cultures and their federation under one system as in the case of Hinduism, and secondly, the safety valve of *Sannyasa*, through which the individual could seek his/her way out when the authoritarian character of the social structure proved oppressive for him/her personally. Society and state even gave a person a respected place if one surrendered the economic advantages accruing from social

conformity".

Over the years Bose's pattern of anthropological enquiry crystallized into a special form. Keeping the larger problem of endogenous regeneration and liberation of Indian society in view, he became 'a perpetual field observer'. He was continuously taking notes on material culture, technology, demography, social organization and cultural heritage of the people in the course of daily and periodic wanderings, whether in hill-forest tribal areas, the peasant villages or in urban situations. Some of his remarkable travel notes and social portraits were later on published in two important collections written in Bengali: *Paribrajaker Diary* (Diary of a Wanderer, 1940, 1951) and *Nabin Prachin* (New and Old, 1949).

In 1930 Nirmal Bose joined the Salt *Satyagraha* movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi. With a few well-wishers and friends like Hangsheswar Roy and Bhagat of Bolpur, Bose organized a *Khadi Sangha* in a settlement of the then 'untouchable castes'. Bose was arrested in 1931 for joining Salt *Satyagraha* and was imprisoned as a 'C' class prisoner, first in Suri Jail and then transferred to Dum Dum Special Jail. D. M. Sen, (who later on became Brigadier as a legal officer in the army) reported to me: "Nirmal babu, whom we used to call 'Nirmalda', impressed us all as a very extraordinary person. The strains of 'C' class prisoner did not seem to affect him at all. He used to be deeply engrossed in reading and writing about the temples of Orissa — there was no sign of discomfort or anxiety in his learning. His presence emanated an atmosphere of quiet confidence in us. We felt we were in a good place and in good company"

Nirmal Bose was being increasingly drawn to the ideas of non-violence and *satyagraha* movements initiated by Mahatma Gandhi, but he also wanted to maintain his grip on his *swadharma* scholarly pursuits, and remain an

analytical observer and commentator of significant human events connected with the comprehensive liberation of the people of India.

He was struck by the observation that even the most down-trodden leather workers *mochis* of Bolpur slum areas maintain a reverential discipline when attending a *sabha* of their *jati*. In contrast, in Calcutta, often such restraints are not maintained in the formal meetings. Bose felt that urban *bhadraloks* have a lot to learn from the way the ex-untouchable groups reverentially deal with their *jati* assemblies.

As a scholar, deeply interested in the modern phase of Indian civilization, Bose became increasingly involved in pursuing Gandhi's ideas about rural reconstruction and non-violence/*satyagraha* as a substitute for violent war.

Gandhi emphatically asserts that the main strength of Indian civilization lies in the numerous village communities. He states : "We are inheritors of a rural civilization. The vastness of our country, the vastness of the population, the situation and the climate of the country have, in my opinion, destined it for a rural civilization. Its defects are well-known; not one of them is irremediable. To uproot it and substitute for it an urban situation seems to me an impossibility. I can therefore suggest remedies on the assumption to perpetuate the present rural civilization and endeavour to rid it of its acknowledged defects."

Nirmal Bose used to be very sad and disturbed that in a vast, highly diversified country like India, Indian anthropologists have shown inadequate interest in making certain areas of research as their own on the basis of innovating appropriate methodological and conceptual tools for probing into the social reality of the country.

Bose firmly believed that corporate committed enquiry, inspired by a concern for national development, with particular focus on the conditions of the down-trodden

people, was bound to generate a spirit of serious innovative research.

Just a few days after joining the Anthropological Survey of India in January 1959 as Director, Bose decided to involve all researchers of the A.S.I., regardless of their official status, to participate in a massive survey of cultural traits in one or two villages selected in each district of Indian mainland. The survey was co-ordinated from Central India Station at Nagpur and, between October 1959 and March 1961, 311 out of 322 districts and 430 villages of India were covered in the rapid survey. The entire data were transferred to cards and a volume *Peasant Life in India : A Study in Indian Unity and Diversity* was published in 1961. Nirmal Kumar Bose wrote in the 'Foreword': "I have pleasure in recording that the entire team worked as a happy family and it has been only on account of their joint endeavours that this overall picture of India has been built up within the short period of less than two years".

In the 'Introduction' of the same book, Bose further writes: "From the information which has already been gathered in regard to these (material) items, it appears that relationships can be established on their basis with Southeast Asia, as with countries lying to the West and Northwest of India. If regionalization is in evidence to a certain extent in relation to material arts of life, the degree of differentiation is less in respect of the country's social organization. If one rises to higher reaches of life confined to ideas, or faiths, or arts, the differences which one noticed at the material level gets feebler and feebler. They are eventually replaced by a unity of beliefs and aspirations which gives to Indian civilization a character of its own".

Bose finally comments: "There is more unity in India's variety than one is likely to admit at moments of forgetfulness. And if this lesson can be brought home by the efforts of the Anthropological Survey of India, every

worker in the department will feel amply rewarded. A deep acquaintance with the facts of life is perhaps the best introduction to any form of Social Science".

Bose's report on the educational problem of NEFA was published in the *Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes: 1968-69*. He clearly spells out three general principles which should guide the national policy for development in North-East India. These are:

(a) The main emphasis should be on building up an economy of unexploitative interdependence between the hills and the plains.

(b) The cultural policy should be extremely permissive and tolerant, providing facilities for autonomous development from the home base of specific tribes or related cluster of tribes.

(c) Demand for cessation should not be negotiable and this should be firmly and unequivocably communicated to those leaders who may be involved in such anti-national demands.

It appears to me that this is perhaps the clearest and most sensible overall policy guideline which has been so far formulated about the unique mountainous tribal regions located at the international frontier of Northeast India.

I often have a feeling that Nirmal Kumar Bose had taken the task of probing into the social reality of the Indian situation in greater depth than many of his contemporary social scientists in India.

I once had a long and very interesting discussion with Professor P.C. Joshi, who was then associated with the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, about how we evaluated Nirmal Kumar Bose in comparison with other

illustrious social scientists like Professor D.P. Mukherjee and Radhakamal Mukherjee who had been his teachers at Lucknow University.

Professor Joshi commented: ''Nirmalbabu was deeply interested in understanding the social reality of the caste system. In this matter his intellectual concern was enriched by his feeling for the poor. He was like a renaissance person in whom there was a co-ordination of intellect, feeling and vision. When I try to compare D.P. Mukherjee, Radhakamal Mukherjee and Nirmalbabu, I feel D.P. was a typical Bengali *Bhadralok* who thrived on books and urban culture. Intellectually, he had sympathy for the poor and the peasant, but he had no genuine contact or feel for the realities of their life. Radhakamal also was an ivory-tower scholar and was not deeply involved in social transformation. Nirmalbabu, in a sense, was superior to the other two. His medium of communication was mainly oral. There, he learnt something from his intimate contact with the people, and perhaps also from Gandhi's mode of communication".

Dr. Joshi also said that Nirmalbabu suffered from a sense of agony that the post-Independence generation of young social scientists were too much influenced by Euro-American concepts and jargons instead of allowing theoretical tools to evolve out of a persistent effort to understand the social reality in the country. He further observes:"Nirmalbabu's real strength came from his whole-hearted revolutionary and humane commitment. He was very active, but was never in tension. He did not suffer from ordinary frustrations".

I have quoted my interview with Dr. Joshi in such detail because this clearly brings into relief how, in Professor Bose's way of life, there was no compartmentalization or break in his official responsibilities as Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, his interactions

with people from all walks of life in the villages and cities, and his great interest in sharing his thoughts with younger scholars. He was a perpetual worker, a perpetual learner and a teacher.

My last meeting with Professor Bose at Park Nursing Home in Calcutta was on October 5, 1972. He could hardly move his head and he told me that cancer had advanced to the back of his head. But his mind was alert. Before I left the room he gripped my hand firmly as I bade good bye. He told me "Don't you ever forget that ours is a wonderful country (wonderful civilization!)".

On the 15th of October, 1972 I received a message that Nirmal Kumar Bose had expired early in the morning. Only death could bring a final halt to his unceasing creative life. But the next generations have the responsibility to carry forward the heritage which he has handed over to us with such care and faith.

I again thank the authorities of Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts for giving me an opportunity to place my thoughts about the heritage of *mahaparivrajak* Nirmal Kumar Bose to this very distinguished gathering. We have a responsibility to carry forward the heritage which is such a brilliant blending of rigorous scientific probing with highly sensitive humane and artistic insights.

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Indian Civilization

Structure and Change

Professor Madan and respected friends. Yesterday I placed some of my ideas about how a great mentor Nirmal Kumar Bose conceptualised the structure and process of transformation of Indian civilization. It was a picture of a hierarchic *varna-jati* order with a unique pattern of interdependence promoting cultural autonomy of ethnic group. The openness of the Hindu mode of production and polytheistic and pantheistic religions and worldview were also discussed.

This evening I would like to begin by presenting my own view on the subject. My own point of view has been greatly influenced by Bose's ideas. However, in recent years, my perspective has been somewhat modified through constant interaction with fellow anthropologists and students. My present position is to emphasize the point that the 'simple' and the 'complex' streams of Indian civilization have been perpetually influencing each other. Similar ideas have been proposed, for example, by Robert Redfield and Milton Singer. They have viewed Indian civilization as being made up of 'little' and 'great' traditions. They emphasize the "flow of reciprocal influence between 'higher' and 'lower' levels of Hinduism" and focus on the process of 'parochialization' or downward spread and 'the converse upward spread' or 'universalization'. I would prefer to use the terms 'simple' and 'complex' rather than 'lower' and 'higher' streams so as to put the two streams which

constitute our civilization on an equal footing. Another very interesting feature of this civilization is the tendency towards conservation of indigenous cultural traits in the process of assimilation of external socio-cultural influences. These two features, I believe, form the bed-rock of our civilization. I elucidate my ideas through some examples based on our field observations and discussions with colleagues and students.

A special characteristic of the Indian civilization has been the existence of multiple channels and media of communication between rural units and scattered centres of civilization through varieties of cultural performances like recitals, dance-dramas and *pravachan*s by wandering *sadhu*s of various *marga*s who would temporarily camp near a village and have discourse with the village laity. In this way complex systematic ideas of the civilization in *Itihasas* and *Purana*s have reached the villages in a simplified form, while the wandering ascetics, literati and performing artists, in their turn, have imbibed some of the folk wisdoms and traditions which were universalized and incorporated in the systematised corpus of the civilization.

The process is somewhat like the geological formations of *stalactite* and *stalagmite* in limestone caves — the centres of civilization moving down to the massive rural base and catering to the abstract themes in terms which are compatible with the 'simple' traditions of the villages. In the interaction process 'simple' traditions get universalized and enrich the corpus of the 'complex' traditions of the civilization. In this way, many folk musical forms have evolved from *deshi* to *marga* level and *marga* forms have been 'parochialised' to *deshi* levels in the countryside. Tagore pointed out in a number of writings that one of the major evils of the British Colonial Rule has been the snapping off of the mutually enriching social and cultural communication between traditional urban centres and the villages.

During 1950-53 and 1956-57 I was studying the processes of cultural changes among the Bhumij of Manbhum district. I noticed a coexistence of aboriginal festivals like the *Sahrul Parab, Desh Shikar, Dalma Puja* and the more Hinduized festivals like the *Chait Parab, Rohin Parab, Ratha Jatra, Ind Parab* and so on. Community dances like the *Sahrul, Karam, Tusu* and *Danr* based on local themes derived from daily life experiences are practised along with the more cultivated forms of dance like the *Chhau* which have themes selected from the *Puranas, Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. We thus see a tendency towards "development through conservation" in this village community.

The *Chhau* dance offers a striking example where we observe a merging of the 'simple' and 'complex' cultural patterns. The performance of the *Chhau* dances commences with a dance in honour of the Sanskritic God Ganesha. This mode of introduction of the dance performance and the choice of themes of these dances reflect a deep seated influence of the 'complex' Hindu tradition on the tribal Bhumij community. The dancers, mainly young men of the village, are coached for about two months by a special trainer (*Ustad*). The masks are made by a special group of people in the village. This phenomenon of cultivated and specialised excellence in a more or less primitive rural community has been termed 'rural cosmopolitanism' by Oscar Lewis. We thus see the 'complex' Hindu tradition of conscious, cultivated practice in performing and visual arts influencing the 'simple' tribal tradition. At the same time, the tribal cultural tradition gives a unique sense of vitality to the *Purana*- and Epic-based Sanskritic themes. Interestingly, Urmimala Munshi, one of my students working on ethnodance of Birabhum has noticed the persistence of the same cultural pattern in Birabhum, after about forty years since my field observations. The only significant change has been that the *Chhau* dance form has gained

exposure to an international audience in the past few years.

Jhumur songs of Birabhum offer another significant instance of acculturation. These songs have been composed by a number of musicians belonging to various levels of the village community under the patronage of the local *Raja*s. Ramkrishna Ganguly, a brahmana and Dinabandhu Tanti, a person belonging to a Scheduled Caste are well-known, *Jhumur* composers or *Jhumuriyas*. We notice that various communities coexist and interact effectively in this creative endeavour. The *Jhumur* songs are widely sung by the Bhumij tribals all over Pargana Birabhum. *Jhumur* has been greatly influenced by the Bengali semi-classical musical form *Kirtan*. One very interesting feature of the *Jhumur* songs is the intermingling of imagery based on the life experiences of the Bhumij and the more cultivated *Kirtan* theme based on the love of Radha and Krishna. Here again we find the 'simple' and 'complex' traditions influencing and enriching one another.

During my field studies in Manbhum I encountered a very wise old gentleman named Gobinda Singh. He was viewed as a large hearted philosopher by the villagers and his wise advice was always considered useful by the community. Once a group of wandering *sadhu*s had staged a performance of the *Ramcharitmanas*. This performance was followed by a discussion which led to a controversy regarding the interpretation of a passage from the *Ramayana*. Some of the villagers sought my opinion in this matter. I found that while I faced considerable difficulty in interpreting the meaning of the passage, Gobinda Singh, who was virtually illiterate, gave a very lucid and elegant interpretation of the passage. One may perhaps trace the evolution of the Baul sect to such philosophical debates between wandering *sadhu*s and localised wise men in the villages. The depth of the Baul philosophical themes had attracted Tagore who incorporated such themes into his

own unique compositions. The Baul sect has thus emerged out of a confluence of 'complex' systematised ideas encoded in the Hindu philosophical texts and the relatively 'simple' folk wisdom. The Baul philosophical tradition in turn has been imbibed by Tagore who has influeneed a large body of people belonging to the 'complex' urbanised traditional centres.

Let us now focus our attention on the Santhals who form one of the largest tribal communities spread over three states of India. The Santhals tend to reside in partially isolated hamlets. According to Borka Soren, a Santhal residing in Kalitala near Santiniketan, the Santhals have been able to develop a unique cultural tradition as a result of their isolation. This secluded existence is the strength of this community. Soren describes the Santhals as people deriving their identity almost entirely from their own society. Their aesthetic sense and mental outlook are rooted in their social lives. In other words, the Santhals place the consideration of 'society' above the ambitions of the individual. He, however, points out that there are evidences of Hindu influence on some of their songs and customs. These external cultural traits have been assimilated in the fabric of the Santhal civilization in a way which is essentially Santhal in character. The relative seclusion of the Santhal hamlets has, however, more or less, protected the community from the 'complex' Indian tradition unlike the Bhumij who have undergone a clear process of Hinduization. We thus notice that the Santhal tribe has preserved its corporate identity and cultural uniqueness even at its final phase of integration with the Hindu society. An important feature of the Santhal tribe is its symbiotic relation with its natural surroundings. Onkar Prasad, a researcher in Visva-Bharti, has recently made a very interesting observation on the Santhals. The Santhals had originally learnt to select the place for constructing their hamlets from the *chitri* (partridge). The partridge

usually nests in a place where certain edible cereals such as Kodo, Marua, etc. are available. The Santhals thus learnt to make use of these cereals for their consumption and started cultivating them. This special mode of learning from nature has enriched the life experience of the Santhals. This thread of learning has got snapped off in the more 'complex' urban culture. In this industrial age we feel the need to emulate consciously some of these natural learning methods of the Santhals so as to gain a more balanced view of life.

In recent years there has been a trend towards conscious preservation of rural based 'simple' traditions by creative artists scattered in urban centres. These artists have incorporated elements from the rural artistic tradition into their 'modern' innovative art forms. The dramatic innovations made by Habib Tanvir utilizing Chhatisgarhi *Nacha* folk theatre forms have led to a fruitful collaboration between rural based traditional performers and more urbanised modern artists. The major participants in these performances are the Chhattisgarhi Chamars. This kind of conscious interweaving between the 'simple' and 'complex' streams of Indian civilization will eventually lead to a better understanding of our cultural heritage by people belonging to both rural and urban centres of this country. In this process of mutual understanding between various cultural strains of this civilization, we need to remember that each of these strains should be given equal importance. In this context I am reminded of an interesting encounter I had with a Naga friend of mine. We once went to Nagaland to participate in a conference on policy for development of Nagaland. Ranu Shaiza, a distinguished Naga political leader, was present at the three-day conference. I noticed that she did not open her mouth on a single day. When I asked her why she was so silent throughout the conference she said: "I found that you have already made up your mind that there is a 'main stream' and we belong to 'the side

stream'. So far as Nagas are concerned, we never consider ourselves as a group belonging to the side stream. If you think that the Nagas are a concurrent stream with the rest of the Indian people, then we are with you". This was the statement of a politician to a neophyte like me and it had an element of truth in it. We need to keep reminding ourselves that the strength of this civilization has been the simultaneous merging and preservation of all the concurrent streams which constitute our civilization.

Many years back Rabindranath Tagore wrote a remarkable essay in Bengali *Bharatbarsher Itihaser Dhara* in which he speculated about the origin of the *Mahabharat*. He pointed out that one of the tasks of Vyasdev (the great compiler of *Mahabharat*) was to collect historical traditions. He gathered together all the scattered folklores in a single frame. He consolidated not only the folklores, but also all forms of beliefs and arguments in favour and against alternative paths and norms of conduct and thus built up a unified conceptual design named 'Mahabharata'. In the past two hundred years since the introduction of the British Rule, our nation has undergone significant social and cultural changes. It is precisely such an age that demands new lineages of Vyasas who would become the appropriate spokesmen for meeting the challenge of reconciling ethnic solidarity movements in the larger canvas of working out a universalized framework of social relations and worldview at the national level. We, as social scientists, should provide important ethnographic data about the people of this nation so that the new Vyasas can weave together all the scattered regional and ethnic traditions of the people of India and build up an awareness about the unified nation through the *Navamahabharata*. In this important task of collecting ethnographic data from various regions of our country, IGNCA can play a very significant role. The core of our civilization is rooted in an oral tradition, in which folklores and folk wisdom have flowed from one generation

to the next through poetry, music and drama. I hope that IGNCA will prove to be a great success in bringing together different forms of performing arts scattered throughout the country and in the process set the stage for building up the *Navamahabharata* or the new *Mahabharata*.

Bibliography

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IGNCA Memorial Lecture Series was initiated in honour of renowned scholars who have done singular service and made path-breaking contributions in different fields of study, and whose academic approach and directions are of direct relevance to the conceptual base of the centre. In this Memorial Lecture Series, so far included, are Hazariprasad Dwivedi (1907-1979), the great stalwart of Hindi literature, Nirmal Kumar Bose (1901-1972), an eminent anthropologist, and Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (1890-1977), a noted linguist.

Surajit Chandra Sinha (b. 1926) was closely associated with Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose since 1949 and was inspired by his original approach to the study of Indian civilization and his dedication and humanism as a man and scholar. Dr. Sinha received his training in Anthropology from Calcutta University and North-western University (U.S.A.). He has taught Anthropology at the Calcutta, Visva-Bharati, Chicago, Duke and California Universities. He has also been Fellow, Centre for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences, Stanford; Director, Anthropological Survey of India; Vice-Chancellor, Visva-Bharati; and Director and Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

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